



The Great Leap Forward and Its Failure

Xiaobo Lü



We will discuss the following

- **The Context:** What led to the Great Leap Forward?
- **The Contents:** What happened during the Great Leap Forward?
- **The Consequences:** What impacts did it have?

The early period of PRC (1949-57) was a successful one for Mao and CCP

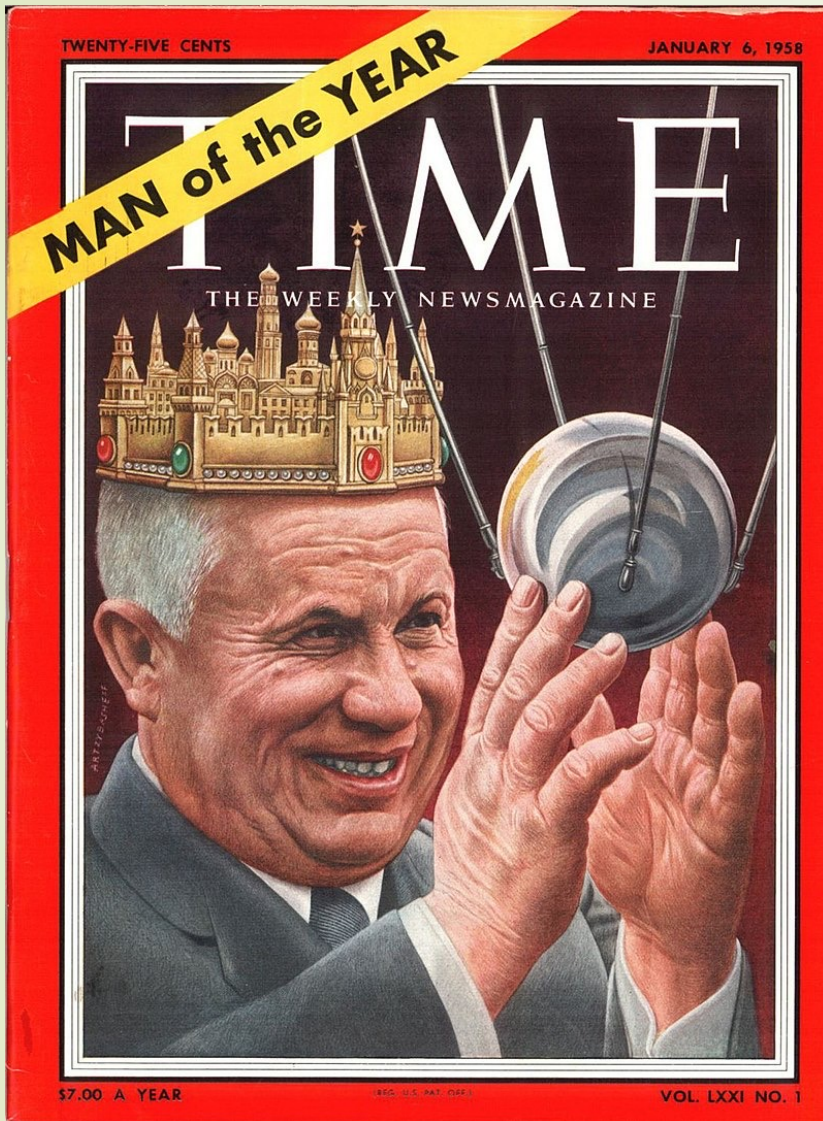
- ▶ **Economic recovery**
- ▶ **Rapid industrialization** (with the support of Soviet Union)
- ▶ **Political consolidation** (the first constitution of PRC, the government structure, and the central planning regime)
- ▶ **Mass support of the new regime** (social reforms, land reforms, defeat of the western imperialist powers)

Things began to change towards the late 1950s

- By 1957, both domestic and international conditions had changed.
- The Soviet model of development—highly concentrated, heavy-industry focused, government controlled—had led to economic recovery and growth, but also created new problems:
 - Tension between state and society, intellectuals felt less free and lost the initial enthusiasm; they were discontent over government officials.
 - Tension between industry and agriculture: gaps b/t urban and rural areas widened.

The Split: CCP and the Soviet Union


- ▶ New Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin and began some reforms including liberalization.
- ▶ Soviet foreign policy also began toward a detent with the West. But it also crushed with armed forces the Hungarian uprising of 1956.
- ▶ A certain degree of crisis among the communist countries around the world: Where were they going to after Stalin? Who should be the leader of the “socialist camp”? Should they seek a more accommodating stand toward the West?
- ▶ The early signs of the Split between China and USSR began to emerge. CCP began to regard USSR as revisionist (of Lenin and Stalin’s thoughts).



Mao's concerns about Khrushchev

The other split: radicalism vs moderates within CCP leadership

- ▶ Mao also had policy differences with his associates: he pressed for more radical and faster development, while some of the CCP leaders cautioned for solid economic growth. In the making of the second “five-year plan” in 1956-7, the moderates in the CCP leadership took a more cautious approach. Mao was not happy.
 - Mao was concerned about the Soviet model: both its methods and consequences.
 - Mao saw the party officials becoming increasingly conservative and bureaucratic.



Mao resorted to his old tactic: the “mass line”—go outside the party

- When he could not get support from inside the party for his radical development visions, Mao sought help from outside of the Party. In May 1957 he launched a “let one-hundred flowers bloom and one-hundred schools of thoughts contending” campaign, aimed at letting people (particularly well-educated) criticize the Party.
- CCP received a lot of criticisms from non-party educated elites. Mao’s suspicion and dislike of intellectuals/experts grew.

The Prelude to the Leap

- ▶ The brief period of liberalization ended in a few months with Mao's counterattack on the liberal critics of the CCP policy. To Mao, the problem was not the CCP was too un-democratic but not radically revolutionary enough. Mao wanted more daring, radical economic development applying creative and revolutionary strategies and methods.
- ▶ On November 13, 1957, the *People's Daily* first used the term "the Great Leap Forward", calling for mass mobilization to achieve faster economic growth and build up a socialist society.

The Great Leap Forward (1958-61)

- The CCP central leadership under Mao in 1958 adopted ambitious economic programs to “rapidly build up socialism and catch up even overtake the West in short time”. Mao used the words “*leap forward*” to describe such program.
- It was unfolded in mostly as a radical economic development campaign, but also involved organizational/political, and ideological arenas. Its impact on PRC was far-reaching.

Attempts at Economic Leap

- ▶ The goals were to more rapidly develop China, to catch up in steel production with the UK in 15 years and US in 20 years.
- ▶ To repay the debts to USSR and become self-reliant sooner.
- ▶ Emphasis given to both industry and agriculture, renewed focus on the countryside and farmers;
- ▶ Industry had a focus on iron and steel production.
- ▶ Agriculture had to increase grain production.

Producing steel by backyard furnaces. Even Mao was impressed.



Steel production needed iron input, so here comes ...





“Meals are free,
Work hard in production”



孩子們在田裏，就像站在軟綿綿的沙灘上似的 于震聲攝影

In rural areas, bumper harvests and free mass meals were reported and showed to Mao who insisted on the leap.



Ideological Leap

- **Ideas matter:** Mao's emphasis on human agency (power of will); Call to break "dogmatic yoke"
- **Continuous revolution:** To avoid what the Soviets experienced after Stalin and prevent conservatism and "bureaucraticism"; to keep revolutionary spirit alive.
- **Self-reliance:** Without help of a socialist "big brother", China had to be self-reliant, finding her own way to economic development.
- **A rapid leap** from socialism to communism (i.e. a higher stage of socialism) **is possible.**
- **Goal culture:** Reaching a certain goal became a basis for performance assessment; it had profound impact on the organizational ethos of the CCP.



Political/Organizational Leap

- **Decentralization:** eliminated many government departments, delegated power to lower levels, let local governments involve more in economic decisions.
- **Enhanced the control** of the Party over administration: merged Party/state institutions
- Sent government staff to the countryside to support rural development and to engage in **manual labor**.
- **New (high socialist) forms of organization:** Rural collectivization (people's communes), free mass dining, multi-functional bodies, even elimination of salaries.
- **Mass mobilization:** used utopia to motivate the public to participate with enthusiasm.

More than an economic leap - Seen from propaganda posters of the time

“Live a collective life like soldiers, ready to battle”

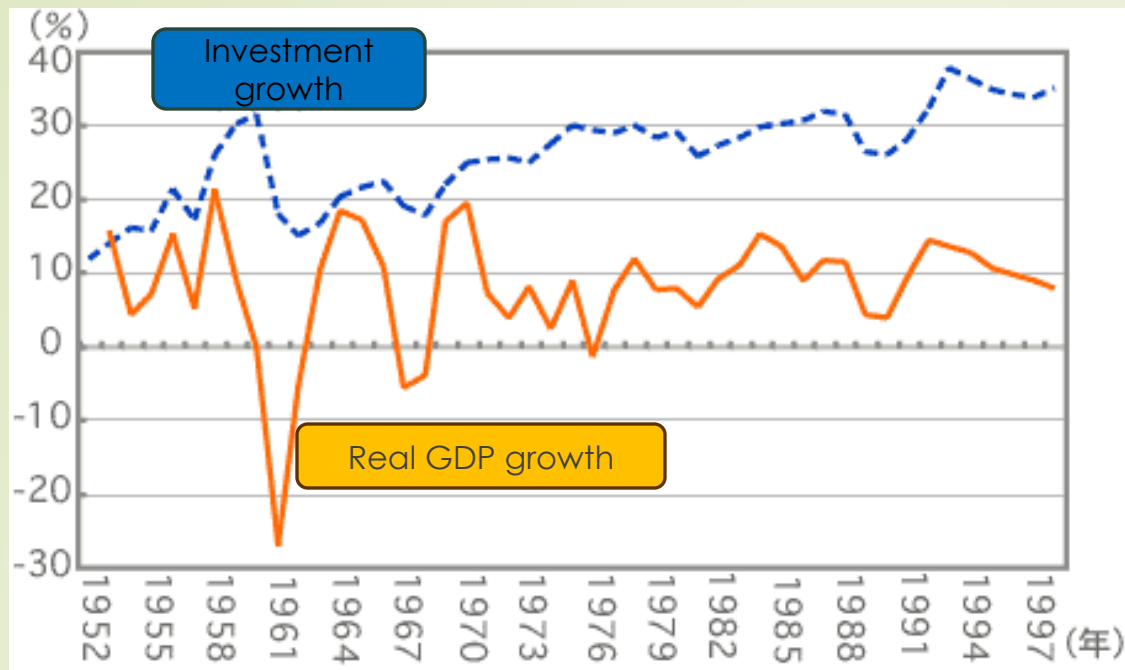


“Work hard and compete for better to rapidly build a socialist society”

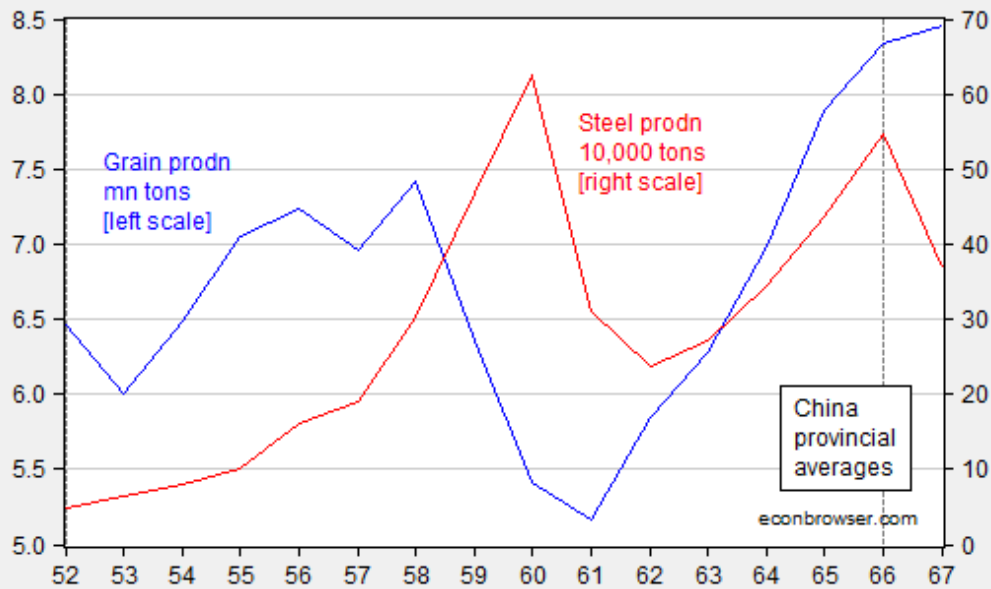


A failed attempt of radical Maoism

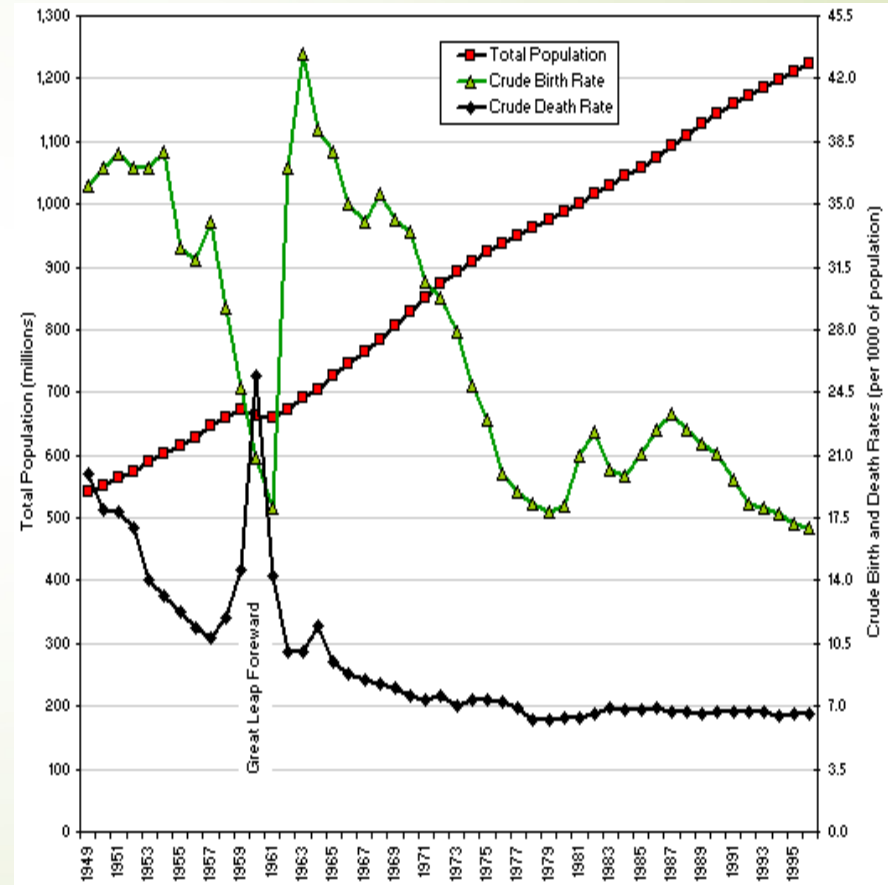
- ▶ GLF ended in disasters:
 - ▶ GDP growth contracted 30% annually 1959-1962.
 - ▶ Ten of millions of people died of starvation and malnutrition;
- ▶ Mao also suffered a personal setback in his leadership stature. Moderate leaders led by Liu Shaoqi had to clean up the mess after 1962.



Economic consequences of the Great Leap Forward




Death toll of the Great Leap Forward period (15 to 43 million)





Why did it fail?

- ▶ Liu Shaoqi said in 1962, GLF failure was due 70% to human factors, 30% natural factors.
 - Irrational and unscientific policies;
 - Overzealous, radical response to the lure of utopian goals of communism;
 - Facing pressure from above, lower-level officials resorted to cheating and hiding truth;
 - Highly wasteful and unsustainable, nationwide fatigue;
 - The country was forced to repay the debts to the USSR;
 - Some areas suffered from droughts.



The damage is beyond economy: political and organizational consequences

- Mao promoted radicalism and denounced conservatism within the CCP ranks.
- Avoiding being conservative and demonstrating radical enthusiasm led to falsified numbers and performative behaviors. This is the beginning of unreliable stats.
- Sewed seeds of internal divisions among the top leadership between pragmatic ones and radical ones.
- In essence, Mao stood Marx on his head by trying to leap over certain stages of socio-economic development. This radical Maoism failed a major test but would continue to lead China into another even more disastrous event—the Cultural Revolution.

Aftermaths and official assessments

- ▶ CCP's first major radical economic and institutional experiment;
- ▶ Mao's radicalism failed and had to be retrenched and redirected by more pragmatic leaders in the CCP for a few years.
- ▶ Official CCP history book calls it "three years of difficult times" with both natural and human causes.
- ▶ Mao retreated but never revised or reformed. He saw this as temporary defeat and would later continue his efforts to address the succession to his rule.
- ▶ The next time Mao returned to his radicalism, his focus would no longer be on economic and institutional issues, but ideological and political ones.